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ABSTRACT

If the basic idea behind multicultural education is to teach students to understand, appreciate, and accept people who are different, then educators may need to broaden the scope of who is included as a minority. They may need to include discussions about sexual orientation. A study involving seven female and four male adolescents--five of whom were gay--attempted to determine the extent to which the reading and discussion of young adult literature about homosexuality affects attitudes about sexual orientation. All 11 participants completed an entrance survey that asked questions pertaining to their feelings about homosexuality; then, they each read and responded to two young adult books about homosexuality; finally they met for a 90-minute discussion that was taped. Results showed that reading and discussing literature serves as a catalyst to changing attitudes both for homosexual and heterosexual students. One heterosexual writes of a character from "Reflections of a Rock Lobster," "I think that Aaron's experience brought to light something I previously refused to believe --that I did have prejudices that were strong. However, I used to only think of prejudices as color and culture differences." Finally, discussion of issues related to homosexuality revealed a flaw in the study itself. It is difficult for students to ask sincere, probing questions about personal matters in a group setting. (Contains 11 references and a student survey on homosexuality.) (TB)

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The Responses of Gay and Straight Readers to YA Novels about Homosexuality

Paper presented at the 1994 National Council of Teachers of English Conference
Orlando, FL.

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The Responses of Gay and Straight Readers to YA Novels about Homosexuality

Paper presented at the 1994 National Council of Teachers of English Conference
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Abstract: Reports the results of a study comparing the responses of heterosexual and homosexual readers to young adult literature dealing with homosexuality. Paper encourages the inclusion of homosexual themes in the study of multicultural issues.

Because of changes in public school demographics, there is a growing emphasis upon multicultural education (Treadwell, 1992). As Davis and Palmer (1992) point out, "teachers have an opportunity to affect perceptions their students develop about the many people of the United States." Unfortunately, we tend to color code multicultural issues. If the basic idea behind multicultural education is to teach students to understand, appreciate, and accept people who are different, then we may need to broaden the scope of who's included as a minority. As educators, we may need to include discussions about people struggling with physical handicaps, cognitive disabilities, gender bias, and issues related to sexual orientation (Mohr, 1989; Schweickart, 1988).

Current estimates indicate that ten percent of the population has a biological preference for same sex partners (Kinsey, 1948; Harris, 1990). If these statistics are accurate, then about three students in an average classroom are coping with the many issues related to their homosexuality. Homosexual students often experience severe forms of rejection and ridicule from their peers (Dunham, 1989; Trenchard & Warren, 1984). It may be beneficial to examine issues dealing with homosexuality in a manner similar to issues related to multiculturalism in order to reduce the amount of misunderstanding and prejudice among heterosexuals.

In the English/language arts classroom, issues related to multiculturalism are often dealt with through the literature read. Walker-Dalhouse (1992) states that "Multicultural literature has value as a literary tool and mechanism for expanding cultural awareness and knowledge." A typical approach might be to include novels such as Spinelli's Maniac Magee or Yep's Dragonwings from which discussions related to prejudice can evolve. The hope is that by introducing the problem and providing a forum in which to discuss it, students will confront their own misunderstandings and biases and begin to initiate some kind of self-reform.

However, this approach rests on many untested assumptions. For one, does reading a novel that introduces multicultural issues actually make an impact on the reader's prejudices? If so, is the impact enhanced by requiring the reader to interact with the ideas of the text either through journal writing or discussion? Additionally, does reading multicultural literature help students accept diversity or does it, in fact, reinforce their prejudices? This is a primary concern which Baker (1990) uncovered when studying readers' responses to Appalachian literature. It was found that poor reading selections or poorly guided discussions can actually reinforce negative attitudes that students have instead of changing them.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study was to compare and contrast how students with differing sexual orientations respond to adolescent literature dealing with homosexual issues. This study examined whether or not reading and discussing young adult novels dealing with homosexuality can impact the attitudes of the readers.

Subjects:

Three female and two male homosexual young adults and four female and two male heterosexual young adults participated in the study. The homosexual participants were members of Lambda Horizon, a gay, lesbian and bisexual student support group from Virginia Tech. The heterosexual participants were students in a course entitled Literature for Adolescents, and participation in the study was allowed to replace one self-graded class assignment. In order to insure anonymity of the participants, all identification was done by using the last four digits of each person's social security number. Untraceable labels or name substitutions have been used for the purpose of reporting the data.

Procedure:

All eleven participants completed an entry survey that asked questions pertaining to their feelings about homosexuality and heterosexuality using open-ended questions (Appendix A). The survey goes on to probe how much exposure the participants have had to homosexuals. This was necessary in order to examine what biases the participants have when entering the study, the rationale being that those who have had a good deal of interaction with homosexuals or homosexuality might be more open to changing their attitudes or perceptions about it.

Second, all the participants read and responded to two young adult books. One novel entitled *Annie on My Mind* tells the story of two adolescent girls who fall in love with each other. The other selection, *Reflections of a Rock Lobster*, chronicles the attempts of a high school boy to invite a male escort to the spring prom. While reading the books, the participants kept journals that chronicled their thoughts and reactions to the readings. Upon completion of the reading, the participants responded to an additional survey that probed for any changes in attitudes (Appendix B).

Next, the subjects met and for a ninety minute discussion of the novels that was audio taped. The principal investigator was present during the discussion, but only functioned as a facilitator. After the discussion, the participants responded to an exit survey to determine if the discussion was able to impact attitudes beyond the initial reading of the novels (Appendix C).

Entry Survey:

Regarding their feelings about homosexuality obtained from the entry survey, the homosexual participants related that they felt "it is natural and . . . deserves the same respect afforded heterosexuality."

Almost all of the heterosexual participants showed a good deal of empathy toward homosexuals: "I think there is so much pain and sadness that people should hold on to love where ever (sic) they find it." This attitude does not seem characteristic of society as a whole. In retrospect, this may be attributed to the fact that participation in the study was voluntary, and those interested in participating may already have been open minded about the subject to begin with. This is of concern since the study was designed to note changes in attitudes, from negative to more open-minded or positive. If the participants were already tolerant of homosexuality, then changes in attitude might be difficult to detect.

Even though there was a general empathy toward homosexuality, the heterosexual participants did express that they had unresolved questions and concerns: "Deep down I don't quite understand it." Another respondent stated "I don't consider myself homophobic, but there are many uncertainties in my mind that I have concerning it."

Regarding heterosexuality, the homosexual participants responded that homosexuality, just as heterosexuality, is a natural, physiological basis of relationships. However, some frustrations were revealed in comments such as "I have no problem with it but am tired of people trying to push heterosexuality on me. I've tried to be heterosexual - and got tired of living a lie and lying to myself."

Another comment made by a gay participant about heterosexuality ended up being a key issue discussed later on. "Many of my hetero friends seem to take so much for granted, being able to openly express emotion, seeing role models in television and newspapers, etc. . . . I suppose it has to do with society being so hetrosexually dominated." This comment can be contrasted to a misgiving about homosexuality made by a heterosexual participant: "I do not want to be forced to see public (physical) displays of affection no matter what genders the participants." It was pointed out in the discussion that the media is constantly bombarding society with images of heterosexual intimacy, yet images of homosexual relationships are considered "distasteful." When the double standard was pointed out, a great deal of discussion ensued that may have helped sensitize the heterosexuals to the problem.

In reference to their own heterosexuality, the heterosexual participants used terms like "normal" and "natural," terms that were not present in their discussion of homosexuality: "I guess I feel that hetrosexuality (sic) is 'normal." A second participant stated, "To me this is more natural because of biological factors. When two heteros have sex, it is ultimately for a purpose - creating life." A third respondent said, "I was raised with the strong understanding that everyone should be heterosexual without exception. The preference comes naturally to me and have never had thoughts otherwise."

An additional insight into heterosexuals' perceptions of homosexuality was found in the journal entries. There seems to be a gender bias of sorts in that heterosexual males can accept homosexuality among females more readily than among males and vice versa. This is pointed out by the following excerpt: "I shared our assignment with my wife and found that she too is somewhat homophobic. She seems to be bothered more by lesbians than by gay men whereas I have a difficult time dealing with and understanding gay men."

Only one pattern seemed to occur on the entry survey related to exposure to homosexuality. Both heterosexual and homosexual participants related to homosexuals in leisure and work environments. Also, both heterosexual and homosexual participants have had gay family members (2 of the 5 homosexual participants and 3 of the 6 heterosexual participants). The only significant difference was that all of the homosexual participants had been sexually intimate with both genders whereas the heterosexual participants reported only having had heterosexual encounters.

Results:

Did the reading of the novels have an impact? From analyzing journal entries as well as reviewing the transcripts of the discussion, the novels did serve as a catalyst for changing attitudes. In writing about *Reflections of a Rock Lobster*, one heterosexual participant recorded "I think Aaron's experience brought to light something I previously refused to believe -- that I did have prejudices that were strong. However, I used to only think of prejudice as color and culture differences."

This insight was repeated by other heterosexual participants: "I think that what I learned the most by reading this novel is the struggle that gay people have to undergo on a day-to-day basis in order to achieve equality." In response to *Annie on my Mind*, this same respondent goes on to state "I now understand that homosexuals have the same desires for intimacy that heterosexuals have and they shouldn't be thought of as abnormalities, but humans." This participant's exit survey concluded with "I have a totally different attitude about homosexuality now after reading these two novels . . . A lot of my misconceptions were cleared up also."

The study made an equally positive impact upon the homosexual participants. In reflecting upon *Annie on my Mind*, one of the gay participants stated "This is a beautiful story. Real love, real pain. Actually what it feels like to be a gay person in love. . . . I had a rough time making myself read this book. I am very glad I did. I am going to buy it for my little sister, she is a freshman in high school. I think it will help her in her understanding of mine and my mother's sexuality." Another homosexual participant stated "I became more proud and empowered by the novels and their honesty about the gay and lesbian relationships in them."

As educators, we are encouraging the inclusion of multicultural literature to help students overcome misconceptions about other cultures and people. However, we often overlook the impact such literature can have in bolstering the confidence and self-esteem of the minority students in the classroom. The importance of including literature for the homosexual adolescent may be particularly acute because the homophobic attitudes of the general population tend to destroy the self-esteem of these students. This is pointed out by one of the gay participants who stated in the exit survey "I feel bad for those just coming out, but the more literature that's available, the easier it will be for kids to accept and love themselves."

Finally, did the discussion help further participants' understanding of one another? It was here that I realized a key flaw in the study itself. It is difficult for students to ask sincere, probing questions about personal matters in a small or large group setting. In short, it seemed as if the participants skirted many issues. This is pointed out by one of the participants in the exit survey: "we were talking about alot of very general . . . things." Another participant stated, "I detect defensiveness from both preferences when discussing the issues. It just goes to show the touchiness of the subject."

The solution came in a journal entry made by one of the gay participants. "My RA from the dorm I lived in last year had no idea [that I was gay]. I talked with him recently and discussed the usual: 'When did you find out?' 'What is it like?' etc. questions." Discussions about matters as sensitive as one's sexual preference occur best in a one-on-one situation. It may be that the main purpose of the small or large group discussion is to open up the issue just enough to allow for one-on-one conversations at a later time and place.

Perhaps the best conclusion can be made by one of the participants: "The more you learn about something the less fear you have about that something." It seems that reading literature about different cultures, and in particular, about homosexuality, can make a positive impact upon both homosexual and heterosexual readers. The heterosexual reader comes to a better understanding of homosexuality and develops more empathy for homosexuals who must endure prejudice on a daily basis. The homosexual reader is encouraged through literary role models and empowered as the characters overcome disheartening obstacles. By introducing such works in the classroom, we are able to foster life-long discussions that will continue outside the classroom.

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Appendix A

Entry Survey:

Last 4 digits of your social security number:_____. This is needed in order to match your entry survey with your exit survey and journal entries.

What is your gender?

_____ Male _____ Female

What is your sexual orientation?

_____ Heterosexual _____ Homosexual _____ Bisexual

Please tell me about your feelings regarding homosexuality:

Please tell me about your feelings regarding heterosexuality:

To the best of your knowledge, do you have any family members who are homosexual?

To the best of your knowledge, do you have any close friends who are homosexual?

To the best of your knowledge, do you associate with homosexuals during your leisure time?

To the best of your knowledge, do you work closely with homosexuals in your work environment?

Have you ever been sexually intimate with a woman?

Have you ever been sexually intimate with a man?

Appendix B

Exit Survey 1:

Last 4 digits of your social security number:_____. This is needed in order to match your entry survey with your exit survey and journal entries.

After reading the novels, please tell me about your feelings regarding homosexuality:

Appendix C

Exit Survey 2:

Last 4 digits of your social security number:_____. This is needed in order to match your entry survey with your exit survey and journal entries.

After reading and discussing the novels, please tell me about your feelings regarding homosexuality: